



RSC FOCUS GROUP

“DEMOCRATIZATION & POLITICAL CHANGE IN ARMENIA”

19 February 2016



On 19 February, the Regional Studies Center (RSC), an independent think tank in Yerevan, convened its latest in a series of special “Focus Groups.” This Focus Group featured a discussion of democratization and political change in Armenia.

Similar to our previous RSC “focus group” sessions, which offer an interactive discussion assessing various issues of critical importance for Armenia, this session focused on the political situation in the wake of the December 2015 passage of a set of constitutional amendments that will transform the country into a parliamentary form of government. The Focus Group discussion also identified key challenges and opportunities facing the democratic development of Armenia. The proceedings and recommendations developed in the Focus Group will also form the basis of a subsequent policy report.

With two dozen participants, the Focus Group was also joined by representatives from the European Union (EU) Delegation to Armenia and the UK Embassy, serving as observers.

RSC FOCUS GROUP “Democratization & Political Change in Armenia”

SUMMARY NOTES & DISCUSSION

I. BACKGROUND

After a brief explanation on the format and objectives of the RSC “Focus Group,” RSC Director Richard Giragosian presented a summary of the four key components of the session:

- (1) Reviewing “Issues of Governance,” related to Armenia’s recently adopted constitutional changes;
- (2) Assessing the term and concept of “Democratization,” as a process and not simply as a general abstract goal;
- (3) focusing on “Priorities for Change,” in terms of pressing issues in Armenian political reform and public policy, starting with electoral reform as an immediate imperative; and
- (4) Meeting the goal of crafting a set of “Recommendations” resulting from the Focus Group discussion.

Acting as Focus Group facilitator, Giragosian noted that as every country has its own unique political culture, marked by different forms of governance and institutions, and reflecting various historical and political traditions. For example, the UK is a country with an obviously vibrant democracy, yet does not have a formal constitution; while in contrast, the American system is different, by virtue of its institutional checks and balances, “bill of rights,” and a “living” constitution.

By extension, the issue of democratization and political change in Armenia must be an authentic reflection of Armenia’s own unique culture and experience, measured on its own standards and values, and less on any regional comparison.

II. KEY QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

1. Issues of Governance

Question: For Armenia, which is now moving to a new parliamentary form of government, when looking at the presidential system, what are the advantages and the disadvantages?

Participants: Presidential form of government means radical decisions. One argument is that Armenia is in an unofficial state of war with Azerbaijan, security is a priority concern. Presidential governance in Armenia allows quick decisive decisions. And also fosters the appeal of a strongman, strong authoritarian leader as the basis for the popularity of Putin. For Armenia, there is an advantage theoretically in a decisive in a state of war or crises.

Disadvantages are the same, as with a strong authoritarian leader – Karimov in Uzbekistan, Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan, where democracy is a secondary consideration and the leader “knows best,” which is negative and unhealthy form of government.

Question: Now that Armenia has moved from presidential to a parliamentary system, are there any advantages and disadvantages in a parliamentary system?

Participants: In the new system, groups and their interests are more equally represented and it helps the development of real political parties. The disadvantages from parliamentary form of government is that “they act slowly” (in decision-making) and also a greater degree of instability.

Question: What is the example of effective government in Armenia? Is local or regional government in Armenia effective ?

Participants: In the regions, the local government bodies do not enough power.

Facilitator: One of the criticisms of the constitutional amendments is that it was an opportunity to correct a glaring deficiency: regional governors in Armenia are still presidentially-appointed; there are no democratic elections for regional governors. The other problem of local self-government is that not all candidates and parties enjoy a level political playing field, and the use of so-called administrative resources by the ruling party in support of their incumbent candidates, even on a local level, presents a real challenge to free and fair elections.

Question: In terms of judicial governance, the role of the courts, and the rule of law: how effective are they in Armenia?

Participants: It is effective for the president, who can have a very submissive non-independent judiciary.

Question: In many countries there is a pronounced lack of trust in government. In Armenia, which institutions hold the most public trust?

Participants: In terms of public trust, the civil society, the army (military) is each trusted. Another institution is business and companies, but they are not trusted- all they wanted is profit and economic activity. When the business and companies are headed by the oligarchs there is a lack of trust and confidence.

2. Democratization

Question: What do you see as a pathway to democratization? Is it through elections? Activism? Revolution? Evolutionary reform?

Participants: Revolution is needed psychologically, in the mentality, but the experience of the European Union, having free and fair elections is the key. For revolutionary change, it’s about a legal framework, and in case where there is not much discussion and debate on it, and more push from the civil society sector. All ministers and the government-dependent bodies will take into consideration also European factors in the civil society.

In terms of civil society, the reason it is important is to be engaged and the power of the citizens is accountability. The second is the revolution, which is hard if you don’t have revolutionaries. Revolution in terms of changing the mind set. But first is the requirement for free and fair elections through which everything else can come.

Question: Looking at the pathway to democratization are there any agents of change?

Participants: International organizations, especially the European Union, the Council of Europe, etc. are important, but they can't be the agents of change for real democracy in countries like Armenia; imposed externally by Moscow or Washington, it will not work.

Youth can be one of the agents of change because of the difference in mentality compared with the older generation. Youth in Armenia are not the products of the Soviet system of education, and most of the youth matured in the independence period of the Republic of Armenia. Youth in Armenia are moderate and more open minded than their parents.

The other agents of change are the new political parties, such as Bright Armenia and Civil Contract, which are different in the way that their leaders are more pro-Western (Western-educated), and much younger comparing to the other party's leaders.

The other agents of change can be civic activists with an example of Electric Yerevan, the other agent of change is the Church. Looking at today's Pope and what he says, he is much more an agent of change. In the Armenian, Georgian and Russian orthodox context, they are resistant to reforms and changes but are not the agents of change.

Question: What about the Diaspora?

Participants: Especially when the Syrian Armenians started to come to Armenia they made change in the mentality of the society. They had a huge impact in terms of diversification. There are other agents of change like social, electronic media, newspapers, which are much more free now.

Question: In terms of the role of the citizen, how can an individual citizen make a difference in Armenia?

Participants: In Armenia, citizens are in a more community-based environment, and for the people, in terms of collective measures, for the revolution, etc., there is a sense of unity.

Facilitator: In terms of the role of the citizens, they have rights but also obligations to the state, as well. What are they?

Participants: Paying taxes, to serve in the army through conscription.

Question: What are the obligations of the state?

Participants: Security, a strong military, social protection, protection of the market, the country properly represented internationally, etc.

Facilitator: The expectations from the government are also leadership, vision, and specific performance, such as the reconstruction of the earthquake zone, crisis preparation and crisis management (earthquake, nuclear accident, etc.).

Question: What are the expectations of the opposition?

Participants: The opposition is expected to have influence, be independent, and to not only criticize but also at times to try to work with the government.

Question: What about leadership qualities? In terms of presidential office, what qualities are needed?

Participants: For a president, the necessary qualities are independence, being a more pro-Armenian leader, having legitimacy. Strategic thinking, public speaking skills, Western educated, or having long experience, because of quality, etc. Also professionalism, and morality, interested more in reputation, rather than money.

3. Priorities for Change

Question: What are your priorities for Armenian public policy?

Participants: Education, lack of knowledge. Most of the professors are from the old generation and they know what's happening, for example now in the IT field. Going out of Yerevan, any public policy means revision, because everything is a problem there, education, transport, jobs, gender issues, domestic violence etc.

Question: What are the instruments to change or affect public policy?

Participants: Education, recognition of the existence of the problem, and then trying to solve it. The other instrument is traveling, exchanging ideas and experience to change the mentality.

Question: What are the obstacles that resist change?

Participants: The obstacles are the corrupted members of the society, especially during the elections selling their votes for 5000 drams. The other problem resisting change is the combination of the church, some of the government oligarchs, the mainstream state-controlled TV media.

4. Recommendations

Facilitator: One important need is to develop alternative education, such as developing more international schools like the Dilijan School. One important solution is to come and advocate within the system, based on checks and balances, where the parliament realizes that is defending their own political jurisdiction. The challenge for civil society and the opposition is that it is not enough to stand back but to build the system together.

Participants: Considering constitutional changes of including different parties and minorities, to what extent is it going to help? There are two positive benefits of the Constitutional changes. It will force the development of the political parties more and the system, and the transformation of the parliamentary form of government makes it difficult later to return to a one-man, authoritarian executive government.